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# Language Learning Beliefs of Iranian Learners: Examining the Role of English Language Proficiency

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## Abstract

To maximize learning, it is crucially important to consider both the beliefs of language learners about learning a language and the factors affecting these beliefs. Therefore, the aim of this study was to explore Iranian learners' beliefs about learning English and find out whether there is a positive correlation between EFL learners' language learning beliefs and their language proficiency level. The data were collected from four public schools in Tehran, Robatkarim District in Iran, using the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI), and the Key English Test (KET). Data were analysed through correlation analyses. The results revealed that participants reported strong beliefs in the categories of "motivation and expectation" and "foreign language aptitude." The findings also revealed that there was a positive correlation between language proficiency and beliefs about language learning.

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*Keywords:* Language learning beliefs; BALLI; language proficiency; learner beliefs

## 1. Introduction

Since the mid-1980s, with the growing interest in the role of individual learners in language learning, a large body of research has been published on learner perceptions or beliefs about language learning that provided educators and policy makers with valuable applications. It is generally agreed that individual language learners hold different beliefs about how language is learned. Individual beliefs about language learning may consciously or unconsciously influence learners' approaches to language learning. As Horwitz (1999) claimed, it is important to understand learner beliefs to better understand

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learner approaches to language learning and to better plan language instruction.

There is no complete agreement on meaning and definition of beliefs, although the definition of this concept enjoys popularity in language learning research. Horwitz (1987) defined beliefs about language learning as language learners' preconceived ideas or notions on a variety of issues related to second or foreign language learning. Beliefs about language learning consist of "general assumptions that learners hold about themselves as learners, about factors influencing language learning, and about the nature of language teaching" (Victori & Lockhart 1995, p. 224). These beliefs have varying degrees of validity and numerous origins often differing radically from current opinions of second language scholars (Horwitz 1987). Some beliefs are influenced by learners' previous positive or negative experiences as language learners, while other beliefs are shaped by learners' cultural background, family/home background, and individual differences such as personality. As Cotterall (1995) puts it, "regardless of their origin, attitudes to learning and the perceptions and beliefs which determine them may have a profound influence on learning behaviour, and may directly influence or even determine a learner's attitude and motivation when learning the language in question." (p. 199)

### *1.1. Why Are Learners' Beliefs Important?*

Learners' beliefs have proved to influence both the actions and experiences of language learners (Horwitz, 1999). Empirical findings have demonstrated that beliefs that language learners hold about a target foreign language and its culture affect their attitudes towards that language and together with other variables play a role in their L2 motivations (Csizér & Dörnyei, 2005).

White (1999) asserted that language learners' expectations developed prior to their experiences are also influenced and shaped by their beliefs. According to White (1999) these expectations influence how individuals react to, respond to and experience a new environment. In other words, learners' beliefs, which are formed through their experiences, guide them in their conceptualizations of language learning and influence the approaches they adopt to L2 learning. If they believe that languages can only be learned through translation and explanation, they will expect the language instruction to be based on translation and explanation and will reject any approach adopted by the teacher which does not correspond to this expectation. Horwitz (1988) has suggested that learners who believe in foreign language aptitude and yet are confident that everyone can succeed in language learning may perceive that "an average ability is adequate" (p. 287) for language learning. With these considerations in mind, teachers can make more informed choices about teaching and are able to adopt a more responsive approach to the organization of learning opportunities in their lessons (Cotterall, 1999; Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005).

There is also a body of evidence which suggests that beliefs about language learning have much influence on learning achievements and experiences (e.g., Horwitz, 1999; Sakui & Gaies, 1999; Mantle-Bromley). An empirical study conducted in China showed how learners' beliefs are likely to be a primary factor in strategy use and language learning achievement. The findings showed a direct causal relationship between gender, first language (L1) and second language (L2) proficiency and vocabulary use, learning strategies and second language proficiency, and learning achievement (Wen & Johnson, 1997).

To date, few studies (Bagherzadeh, 2012; Fatehi Rad, 2008; Mohebi & Khodadady, 2011) in Iran have taken learner beliefs into consideration and they have mostly focused on university learners. Moreover, language proficiency is another factor that has not enjoyed any popularity among the previous research studies. It is thus hoped that findings from the current study will shed light on the kinds of beliefs that Iranian junior high and high school learners hold, alongside the relationship that might exist between Iranian learners' language learning beliefs and their language proficiency levels, and consequently assist to improve learners' English language learning outcomes.

### *1.2. Research Questions*

This study intended to address the following research questions:

- 1) What language learning beliefs do Iranian English junior high and high school learners hold?
- 2) Is there any statistically significant relationship between Iranian learners' language proficiency levels and

their beliefs language learning beliefs?

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

To accomplish the objectives of this study, the researcher selected a total of 226 (113 males and 113 females) learners studying at four public schools in Robatkarim District in Tehran, Iran and asked them to sit for KET during the 2012 spring semester. The subjects were enrolled in the third grade of junior high school and first grade of high school at the time the data were collected. The participants ranged in age from 14 to 17.

### 2.2. Instrument

In order to measure the overall English proficiency of participants, a paper-based version of the Key English Test (KET) was administered. This test included four skills of speaking, reading, writing, and listening in multiple-choice format. In the speaking section, which comprised two parts, the participants two by two took part in an interview. The participants were asked some questions about themselves, their school or job, their daily life and their free time.

In order to collect information on language learning beliefs, a Persian version of Horwitz's (1987) 34-item Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) was used for purpose of the study. BALLI is a 34-item Likert-scale questionnaire, developed by Horwitz (1987), to identify student beliefs. The BALLI assesses learners' beliefs in five major areas: (1) foreign language aptitude; (2) the difficulty of language leaning; (3) the nature of language learning; (4) learning and communication strategies; and (5) motivations and expectations (Horwitz, 1987, cited in Horwitz, 1999). The BALLI instrument has been employed in a number of subsequent studies (Hong, 2006; Kern, 1995; Mokhtari, 2007; and Yang, 1999). In some other studies a modification of the BALLI has been used.

Data elicited from learners' responses to each item in the BALLI and KET were analysed using SPSS. The proficiency tests and the questionnaires were given out during learners' regular English classes in the spring semester, 2012. In this study alpha reliability coefficient of the BALLI questionnaire and the Key English Test turned out to be 0.84 and .93 respectively.

### 2.3. Procedure

After piloting the questionnaire and the test, the Key English Test was administered. In order to classify the participants into three groups (Low, Intermediate, and High) their total KET scores were used. To have a relatively similar number of participants, the means and standard deviations of the four groups' scores were calculated. Then one standard deviation ( $SD = 15$ ) was added and subtracted from the mean scores ( $M = 55$ ). Therefore, the low proficient group scored between 19 and 40 and intermediate participants scored 41 to 70 and finally High group scored between 71 and 94. Hence, the learners were classified into 57 low, 120 intermediate, and 47 high proficiency learners. In the second phase, the participants were given take home questionnaires to fill in and return them the following week. The data collected for this study were analysed through descriptive statistics, including frequency tabulations as well as a series of correlational analyses.

## 3. Results

This section aimed to analyse the frequency distribution of the beliefs of the participants about language learning alongside descriptive statistics of KET scores. As the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) have 5 sections, the results obtained from the participants were categorized into five factors. The results are given in Table 1.

Table 1 Distribution of the Items of Belief Questionnaire Based on their Construct

Constructs	Mean	SD
The difficulty of language learning	3.74	1.29
Foreign language aptitude	3.94	1.33
The nature of language learning	4.16	1.30
Learning and communication strategies	4.28	1.30

Motivation and expectations	4.83	1.20
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Regarding the five components of beliefs about language learning, the results revealed that learners had the strongest belief in motivation and expectations, followed by learning and communication strategies and the nature of language learning. The weakest two factors were belief of the nature of language and belief of foreign language aptitude.

Table 2 depicts the descriptive statistics of each group regarding their language learning beliefs and language proficiency.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics of BALLI Responses and KET Scores

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Overall Belief	137.65	11.53	226
HPG Belief	142.24	10.87	47
IPG Belief	135.04	10.19	122
LPG Belief	132.26	11.41	57
Overall Proficiency	55.13	15.22	226
HPG Proficiency	79.43	6.98	47
IPG Proficiency	55.61	8.33	122
LPG Proficiency	34.71	6.37	57

In order to investigate whether there is any relationship between the participants' beliefs about language learning and their proficiency level, a series of Pearson product-moment correlation analyses were run. As illustrated in Table 3, a positive low correlation ( $r = .36$ ,  $n = 221$ ,  $p = .000$ ,  $p < .01$ ) was found between language proficiency of Iranian learners (as measured by the Key English Test) and their beliefs about language learning (as measured by the BALLI questionnaire).

Table 3 Correlation between Proficiency Level and Beliefs of Iranian Learners

		HPG Belief	LPG Belief	IPG Belief	Overall Belief
Proficiency	Pearson Correlation	.01	.06	.26**	.36**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.94	.68	.02	.00
	N	47	57	122	226

Further, the findings showed that there was a statistically significant, though weak, positive correlation between the intermediate level learners' proficiency and their beliefs about language learning ( $r = .26$ ,  $p = .020$ ,  $p < .05$ ). However, no significant correlations were found between the HPG and LPG learners' proficiency and their beliefs scores. Table 4 shows the relationships between language proficiency level and the five sub-areas or constructs of beliefs about language learning. The findings indicate that language proficiency has positive weak correlations with every single one of the constructs of beliefs about language learning.

Table 4 Correlation between Proficiency Level and Sub-categories of Beliefs of Participants

		Difficulty of LL	FL aptitude	Nature of LL	Learning & communication strategies	Motivation & expectations
Overall Proficiency Correlation	Pearson	.18**	.17**	.18**	.30**	.32**
		.00	.01	.006	.00	.00
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.226	.226	.226	.226	.226
HPG Proficiency Correlation	Pearson	.09	-.32*	.13	.06	.16
		.53	.02	.36	.64	.27
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.47	.47	.47	.47	.47
IPG Proficiency	Pearson Correlation	.229*	.13	-.011	.223	.19
		.043	.25	.927	.050	.09
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.122	.122	.122	.122	.122
LPG Proficiency	Pearson Correlation	-.07	-.00	.22	.01	.03
		.59	.98	.12	.90	.81
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.57	.57	.57	.57	.57

Nevertheless, as illustrated in Table 4, there was only a negative low correlation ( $r = .32$ ) between HPG proficiency and the construct of foreign language aptitude. Moreover, there was a weak positive correlation ( $r = .229$ ,  $p = .043$ ,  $p < .05$ ) between the IPG proficiency and the difficulty of language learning construct. However, there was no significant correlation between the LPG proficiency and any of the constructs of belief.

#### 4. Discussion

Regarding beliefs about language learning, participants generally had positive beliefs about learning the language. Specifically, they were most positive about their motivations and expectations. The overall data obtained from the questionnaire suggests that Iranian learners are quite optimistic about their future language learning progress and show relatively high levels of motivation. This result is consistent with outcomes reported by other researchers who examined language learners' beliefs about language learning in different contexts. For example, Chang and Shen (2010) studied junior high school learners' beliefs about language learning. They reported that belief of motivation and expectations ranked first, while belief of foreign of language aptitude ranked last. Sioson (2011) investigated language learning strategies, beliefs about learning English as foreign language, and language anxiety among Filipino EFL learners. With regard to beliefs about language learning, participants had a general positive belief about learning the language. Specifically, they had the most positive belief about their motivations and expectations. The overall data obtained from the questionnaire suggested that Iranian learners are quite optimistic about their future language learning progress and show relatively high levels of motivation. For example, they tend to believe that they will ultimately learn to speak English very well.

Concerning foreign language aptitude, similar to the findings of Kern (1995), learners tended to believe that it is easier for children than for adults to learn English. Moreover, many learners agreed that it is easier to speak than understand a foreign language. Surprisingly, 50% strongly agreed and 35.7% agreed or somewhat agreed that it is best to learn a foreign language in the foreign country. This was well supported by foreign language learners in Kern's (1995) and Horwitz's (1988) studies. The statistical analysis showed a positive and significant correlation between language proficiency of Iranian learners and their beliefs about language learning. Further analysis indicated that language proficiency level has fairly weak positive correlations with every single one of the constructs of beliefs about language learning. These results support the findings of Hong (2006), Abedini (2011) and Bagherzadeh (2011). However, Diab (2000) reported somewhat different findings. The study found that there was no significant correlation between the language proficiency of learners and their beliefs scores.

## 5. Conclusion

This study investigated the language learning beliefs of Iranian EFL learners (i.e., beliefs about foreign language aptitude, the difficulty of language learning, the nature of language learning, learning and communication strategies, and motivations and expectations) to provide a deeper understanding of the processes learners engage in the process of learning a second language. Horwitz (1987) claimed that erroneous beliefs about language learning might lead to less effective language learning strategies and consequently less successful learners. After understanding learners' beliefs about language learning process, teachers may be able to help their learners in coping well with such erroneous beliefs.

The participants in this study were highly motivated for learning English both integratively and instrumentally. For instance, participants believed that learning English is very important because they would get to know the English native speakers as well as their culture better. This study contributes to the general understanding of learners' beliefs on English learning and its relationship with language proficiency. The current survey study yielded substantial results concerning some differences between proficient learners and less proficient learners' language learning beliefs. The findings further indicated that the higher the means of language learning beliefs held by the learners are, the more proficient they will be. The findings revealed that, compared to other groups, more proficient learners tend to be highly motivated about learning the new language and felt more optimistic about the future of their language learning. The findings on learning and communication strategy use involving successful learners may be assessed as part of strategy training, which would in turn lead the less proficient learners to benefit from the effective strategies employed by the good learners to develop their EFL proficiency. Based on this study's findings, educators and course book designers need to take learners' prior beliefs into account when designing language learning syllabi to correspond those with learners' prior beliefs that exist among different learners. Moreover, by encouraging appropriate beliefs and providing effective instruction of learning strategies according to learners' situation, teachers and educators can teach English more effectively.

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